



PANIC AT THE DISCOURSE

An Interdisciplinary Journal

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Panic at the Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Volume 1, Issue 2, July 2019, pp.17-27 (Article).

Published by Panic at the Discourse.
ISSN 2562-542X(Online)

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to examine how Marvel and DC Comics superhero fans build their performances based on their consumer practices and how they contribute as identity elements for these subjects. The research, which presents a qualitative approach with ethnographic bias, seeks to analyze the consumption processes, essentially based on the precepts of Miller (2013) and Barbosa and Campbell (2006), to reflect the multimedia character and mainstream status that these characters acquire. Empirical analysis, based on Schechner's and Goffman's concept of performance, show that consumer processes are closely related to subjects' identity narratives, which create their performances as fans from the consumption of different products related to the adored superhero.

Keywords: consumption, performance, superheroes, fans

Introduction

Cultural theorist Henry Jenkins presented a new understanding about fans.¹ For him, it is not just someone who is a “fanatic” but an individual who contributes to popular culture. He surveyed television fans, reshaping the fans from passive consumers and cult servants to those most actively engaged in cultural products—in these terms, fans have become “poachers” and “nomads.” Jenkins' research changed the idea of a fan to someone who chases parts of the existing culture and creates alternative interpretations and individual constructs from it. As both “poachers” and “nomads,” fans are always in movement, advancing in relation to other texts, appropriating new materials, and creating new meanings.

Over the last few decades, fan studies have generally shown how fans and fandoms have traded, interfered, and collaborated with the productions of the entertainment industries. In this work, I intend to investigate and problematize how consumers appropriate these pop culture media texts. In this way, I am interested in seeing how Brazilian superhero fans build their performances based on the consumer practices and how these performances contribute as elements of the subjects' narrative.

Is the Superhero Now Mainstream?

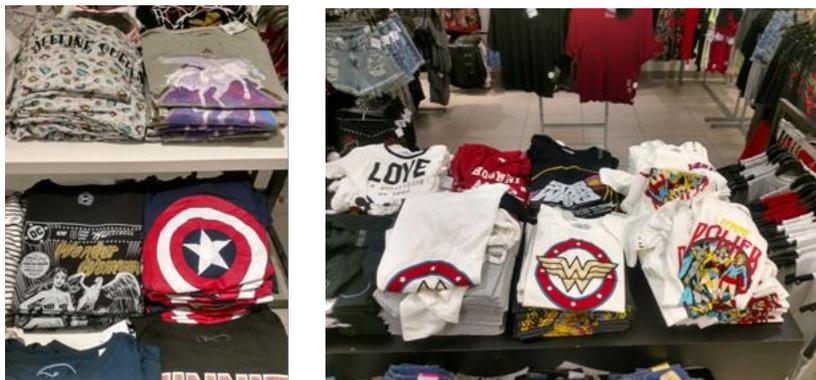
The heroes of the comics, have gained space beyond the shelves of stalls and bookstores focused on this market. In theaters, one of the forerunners was the 1978 feature film *Superman*.

Currently, it is seen as a milestone of superhero movies and considered the first blockbuster of the genre.² It was from this film that these characters began to gain more cinematic adaptations. Conquering box office records, studios are increasingly investing in the superhero genre. Proof of this are the feature films *Iron Man 3* (2013), which grossed \$1.215 billion, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), with a \$1.405 billion gross, and *The Avengers* (2012), which had a box office of \$1.519 billion, making it the fifth-grossing film of all time.³

Cinema and television seem to have been together in the process of expanding comic book adaptations. Both Marvel and DC Comics have invested heavily in the production of TV series and animations. DC Comics' *Supergirl* (2015-), *Gotham* (2014-), and *The Flash* (2014-), and Marvel's *The Defenders* (2017), and *The Punisher* (2017-2019), are some examples. DC Comics's *Black Lightning* (2018) by The CW Television Network, and *Krypton* (2018) by Syfy were launched in 2018. Streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime have also invested in this type of production.

The growth of stores aimed at sales of 'geek' stuff should also be analyzed as a way fans extend their relationship with the adored superhero. Buying items such as shirts, posters, and collectible toys is common among fans. Recently, established Brazilian department stores have started selling comic book products, such as T-shirts, bedding, and decorative items (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Marvel and DC Comics superhero T-shirts at C & A stores (left) and Renner (right).
Photography from personal archive.



Overall, new ways to experience and consume surround superhero fans. In addition to the strong presence in the entertainment industry, fan-oriented events have also gained relevance. The Comic

Con Experience (CCXP), held five years ago in São Paulo, Brazil, reached an audience of more than two-hundred-and-twenty-seven thousand people in the 2019 edition, establishing it as the largest comic-con in the world. For comparison, the San Diego Comic-Con, one of the most important and which began in 1970, has an annual audience of more than one-hundred-and-thirty-five thousand people. This data indicates that the great growth of consumption has given the universe of superheroes mainstream status, that which is dominant, popular, and destined for the public.⁴ However, what is the perspective of the fans about this process?

Ramzi Fawaz, author of *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics Postmillennial Pop*, relates that Superman's death in 1992 became a milestone that went beyond the boundaries of a comic book's pages.⁵ The author points out that months before the story was scripted, the American print and television media hailed the hero's death as an event of extraordinary cultural significance, boosting what initially seemed a creative decision isolated from the field of public debate.

Public opinion ranged widely, from those who interpreted Superman's downfall as a righteous critique of America's moral bankruptcy to those who recognized it as a marketing stunt to boost comic book sales. In an editorial for the Comics Buyer's Guide years later, leading comic book retailer Chuck Rozanski claimed that upon hearing about the decision, he had called DC Comics editor Paul Levitz, pleading with him that "since Superman was such a recognized icon within America's overall popular culture ... DC had no more right to 'kill' him than Disney had the right to 'kill' Mickey Mouse." According to Rozanski, by choosing to kill Superman for sensational purposes, DC would be breaking an implicit promise to the American people to preserve the hero's legacy as a "trustee of a sacred national image."⁶

Fawaz looks at this context from the American perspective, presenting the hero as a representative of the values of that country. However, Superman is not only important to the United States: he is a character that reaches a global dimension. The death of the superhero was reported in *Jornal Nacional*, one of the most watched Brazilian television news programs. If Americans identify with the character because they see him as a symbol of the moral principles of the United States, what leads Brazilians to adore characters like Superman?

The possibility of global distribution is the first step to understand the "transcultural fandom."⁷ It is the understanding of fan groups of media products established in a national, regional, or local dimension. These groups form in an organized or organic way and they are able to take readings and give new meanings within their own contexts. This understanding is allied with "international-popular memory."⁸ According to the Renato Ortiz, this memory works as a system of communication outside the medium of common cultural references—it establishes

connection between people. The global cultural production ends up assuming a strong role in the social relations and the daily life of the people, permeating diverse social practices exactly as it is the case of the fans.

It is through the stories and the stories that humanity preserves memories and values through the generations.⁹ According to theologian Iuri Andréas Reblin, human history is confused with the sphere of the heroic:

Since the earliest times, the great feats of great heroes are mostly transmitted from generation to generation. They exist and persist because they carry in their personal values (physical, mental and moral, as Nildo Viana points out): coherence, courage, charisma, determination, wisdom, altruism and self-sacrifice. Moreover, through their actions, the heroes keep alive the hope of a new social order, the possibility of a change of reality...Heroes are admired, above all, for their courage to face the dominant and the powerful. They are those who stand, even when the bravest of mortals fall.¹⁰

Reblin proposes that even if the comic book industry were to ruin (and here it is necessary to expand for the entertainment industry as a whole, since superheroes are now in theaters, games, TV series, and other mediums), superheroes would continue to exist in the human imagination and their stories would continue to be told. He justifies this position, claiming that the mythical and archetypal structures of superheroes transcend the time and space of the century or country in which they were generated.

Comic books become important cultural products when one realizes that they are historical facts, opinions and latent tendencies capable of translating the context of an era. Superhero comics are, therefore, a part of this whole. Superheroes are historical and social products, so that the creation and renewal of these characters - as well as the themes, values, conceptions, present in their stories are crossed by reality.¹¹ According to Fawaz, comic characters can be defined as a living archive of our collective fantasies about a number of concerns, including the nature of power (its pleasures and dangers), the meaning of ethical action and collective goodness, visual pleasure in witnessing impossible skills, and the ability to change the world.¹²

Performances as Methodological Lenses

Performance theorist Richard Schechner states that “performing” can be being, doing something, showing oneself doing something, or explaining the fact of “showing oneself doing something.”¹³ In this work, I consider a myriad of practices related to the superhero fans as

performances: wearing the hero's T-shirt; buying personal or decorating items with the character; watching a movie or reading a comic book; getting a superhero related tattoo; and, other expressions.

Sociologist Erving Goffman applied the concept of performance to daily life.¹⁴ He relied on the ideas of dramaturgy to describe the ways in which individuals create and exhibit themselves. He interpreted everyday life as a stage in which people assume different roles according to the situation in which they are placed and the audience with which they interact. According to Goffman, what is essential for these performances to happen is the presence of the other. Amaral, Polivanov and Soares point out that for Goffman, all we are and have are performances, whereas we use them as a form of construction and presentation to others.¹⁵

Even if one accepts the generalized notion of the main conception of fandom, something characterized by the collective aspect, one still needs to understand it as performative.¹⁶ For Hills and Grecom, fandom is related to the “representation of an identity; is about a sense for the self, about affection, in terms of acting on an emotional, subjective level.”¹⁷ Performance is an integral part of fan and fandom experiences, especially now, where the digital setting makes communities more visible and more accessible than at any other time in the past.¹⁸

In discussing the notion of musical performance, sociomusicologist Simon Frith considers performance as a possibility of negotiation between artist and audience.¹⁹ I also understand the performances of fans as an element of negotiation in various instances: with the adored products / franchises, with other fans, with other non-fans, etc. The performance serves as a resource for fans to introduce themselves and interact as such. Therefore, in this research, I do not use the concept of performance as a theoretical pillar, but rather as a “methodological lens”²⁰ to see how the subjects present themselves as fans.

The present interviews were conducted for my master's research titled “Unveiling the Fan of Superheroes: Performances, Consumption Practices and Identities.” The methodology of research is based on the precepts of ethnography, which has an interest in the lived experience. Before discussing the interviewees' statements, I selected some excerpts from their personal presentations, so that it is possible to know some of their profiles:²¹

Bruce Wayne: I work with drawing, with illustration. I am 34 years old. I was one of those children who drew and everyone said, "Oh, my, how you draw well," and I believed. So I kept doing it all through life. When I was a teenager I was a fanzine, I was collecting Vertigo, I lived in a newsstand, before and after class, on weekends. When I went to the beach, I would get on my bike for miles until I found a decent newsstand so I could see what was new. I got to the point of going there obsessively, daily, maybe sometimes more than once a day, like someone who is anxious and opens the refrigerator to see if food appears, knowing that would not have anything.

Diana Prince: I'm 24 and I'm doing Literature, bachelors in Japanese. I was a very lonely child and watched what was on TV. So I got influences from anime, manga ... I'm a person who by definition is a nerd. If currently I am a sociable person is because of the nerds things, well, because in the old days I just went to have friends from the seventh grade. And before that I had fake profiles of anime characters, which I used to talk about manga. At the events I could socialize a bit too. Over time, I think I've learned to be sociable with the fake profile.

Lois Lane: I'm a transsexual woman, I'm 24 years old, I'm unemployed. I was a student, but I dropped out of Public Policy [...] faculty. I'm from Caxias do Sul, but I lived in Porto Alegre my whole life basically. I studied public school my entire life and I think that's the introduction.

Clark Kent: I'm 38 years old. I'm a federal civil servant and I'm taking a bachelor's degree in history. I love cinema, I am a movie buff, I love series and movies. I love Social Medias, I'm a fan of comic books, and I particularly like DC Comics most. I've always loved the stories of superheroes, I've always found the stories very captivating.

Along with their testimonials, I add my own experiences and insights, as I also consider myself a fan of superheroes. In my case, Captain America is the character to whom I dedicate part of my shelves in my house and my admiration.

Consumption in the Constitution of Fan Identities

Establishing a fan culture is only possible from consumption. In addition, it is through the anthropological perspective that I am going to work on the approaches to consumption, which has become a complex field of investigation, integrating several activities, actors and a set of goods and services that are not restricted only to the form of commodities.²² Moreover, what is the importance of consumer goods fans?

Clarke Kent: DC is doing now this arc of rebirth and I am particularly following. I have bought most of the comic books and I have been enjoying it a lot, for the content, for its new proposal of return to the origins. The stories have been quite pleasing to me.

Bruce Wayne: When I saw Superman's Death on the newsstand in a special edition with laminated cover, I bought it. The strategy of shock in the fan, or of shock in the subject who is not a fan, but who is aware of these things, worked completely for me. I was like "Oh, the Superman died!"

Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood consider consumer goods as elements that communicate cultural categories and social values. It is through goods that the categories of culture become tangible.²³ The authors point out that consumer choices carry social meanings, saying something about the subject, their family, their city, and their network of relationships. The act of consuming is a process in which all social categories are continually defined,

affirmed, or redefined. However, what do these assets represent to the fans? When Clark Kent says “*it’s on my wish list to buy the Dark Knight’s hardcover*” or when Bruce Wayne comments that comic books are no longer sufficient for this audience who also feel the need to purchase t-shirts, mugs, etc., they are giving clues to what goods really mean to fans in general.

Material objects are a scenario. They make us aware of what is appropriate and inappropriate...The surprising conclusion is that objects are important not because they are obvious and physically constraining or enabling, but just the opposite. Often it is precisely because we do not see them. The less we are aware of them, the more they can determine our expectations, set the stage and ensure appropriate behavior, without undergoing questioning.²⁴

In the case of fans, the objects evidence this worship. If you enter my apartment, you will know, right in the first room, that I like comics, Star Wars and Terry Pratchett. Incidentally, if I go into further analysis, it seems that all those objects that define me as a consumer are in my living room, that is, in the social place of my house. I agree with the authors that consumption is a central aspect of constructions and perceptions of identity when I analyze my relationship to material goods. When I think of all of the Captain America merchandise that I have, I realize I did not buy most of them. They are gifts that I gained from people who ended up collaborating to consolidate my fan identity, even if this was not their original intention. I put together all the objects I have of the character (Figure 2). Of all the items I have, I only bought a few comics, the fabric doll, and the mask.



Figure 2. My personal Captain America items. Photography from personal archive.

This exercise refers to Miller's analysis, which argues that in order to study objects, it is necessary to be where they are. In most cases, they are in our homes. After all, the furniture, the way we organize our things, the photographs, the decorative artifacts, will tell us a lot about our history, memories and tastes – it will tell us who we really are. Objects make people to the extent that culture also arises from objects.²⁵

However, even with all the character of affectivity wrapped in objects, fans recognize the monetary investment as an obstacle in the acquisition of goods:

Diana Prince: I like to consume, I like to have these things, but I'm not that close to it because I don't have a lot of money. Hence, most things I keep wishing for a while, until when my birthday arrives, someone gives it to me.

Bruce Wayne: Obviously, I attach value to paper, the storage of this material. I like to have the stories on paper. I like to handle the comic books. Do I have a large digital collection? I have, but it's not as interesting to me as the physical collection.

The popularization of superheroes made it easier for consumers to buy objects such as shirts, mugs, and buttons. However, the fans see this process from different perspectives. Clark Kent understands that these objects may be fundamental to evidence the fan identity:

Clarke Kent: I think the following: If you like comics, movies, series, and, somehow, you demonstrate this through props like T-shirts, I think it's cool. You see I got the Justice League T-shirt here. The fans are performative. At different levels, they are performative. Not only in what they speak, but also in how they present themselves.

Lois Lane thinks that, on the one hand popularization sometimes corroborates the falling of the prices, while on the other hand there may be a process of trivializing superheroes, and the distinction between who is a fan and who is not a fan will become much more difficult.

Lois Lane: The more massified, the cheaper the product gets to my consumption, so this is good. Having more people who enjoy it and consume it is also an opportunity for me to get to know these people and have a contact with them. I'm afraid of when that wave passes ... I have a friend who even likes comics, but he has some T-shirts from Thor and other characters because it's cheap to have these shirts. And he's not a fan, but he has these shirts because they're there to sell. This creates a "nerd" camouflage. It was to create a facility for people to meet other nerds and I think it's making it difficult.

Bruce Wayne, who is a comic book collector and keeps shelves and tables in his house full of them, has no affinity with other objects that have a relationship with the superheroes he accompanies:

Bruce Wayne: *In a way it is not enough that the comics circulate in different formats, colors and flavors. You need those things ... T-shirts, mugs, etc. ... But I confess I don't like much. I don't pay much attention either. Like I said, I know this is an important part of the market, but I don't like it.*

Our relationship with material objects goes far beyond the process of acquisition and use. It is no wonder that the practice of collecting is something so common among fans. Collecting is a creative process that consists in the search and possession of objects in a selective and passionate way. By its character of dedication and commitment of the collector, the practice of collecting establishes a direct relation with concepts like affectivity and passion. Collectivism is an intensely involving form of consumption.²⁶ Collecting is one of the practices that shows the anthropological character of consumption, as we have been dealing with throughout this work. Barbosa and Campbell point out that social subjectivities and identities have become intimately tied to consumption and consumer customization.²⁷ In this context, consumption has a cultural dimension as it functions as a space of social relations in which the negotiations are made freely, in addition to the economic and financial aspects and the cultural norms and morals, which define consumption patterns. Therefore, the act of consuming is complex: from it, we find the elements that collaborate in the identity processes and we relate to other individuals through their own consumption practices in order to put us as similar or different.

Ultimately, consumption implies an order of social meanings and positions, indicating information about who consumes, about their social position, status, local to which they belong or the bonds that they are able to establish. In addition, consumption is a set of sociocultural processes in which people make sense and use products and services in order to say something about themselves, the society, the groups and the localities in which they live. In the case of fans of superheroes, the whole relationship with the characters and the construction of identity, individually and collectively, are based on the processes of consumption.

Conclusion

The media's popularization of superheroes allowed them, more than ever, to contribute to the lives of their fans. For the collaborators of this research, it seems that this link is about a devotion to the superheroes that is created, nourished and resignified from the search of these subjects for opportunities of new experiences to broaden the bond with the character. Decisions about professions and careers, something that is thought for a lifetime, reveal that it is not just a hobby or a simple form of entertainment. I have to include myself in this perspective, since from the very first steps in the academy, I have directed my research interests to my predictions of pop culture. As "poachers" and "nomads" we contribute to cultural processes imbricated in consumption, but we also shape and identify ourselves as fans from these phenomena.

From the analysis, it is possible to perceive that the tastes and objects of affection of the fans end up imbricating themselves in their trajectories of life. This inference corroborates the recognition of fan studies and consumer studies as fields that contribute to the understanding of the culture as a whole. In addition, these areas of research have a particular affinity with the theoretical-methodological approaches that discuss the question of identity. After all, it starts with the individual to understand the processes within the collective.

Notes

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⁷ Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto, "Towards a Theory of Transcultural Fandom," *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 10, no.1 (2013): 92–108.

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¹² Fawaz, *New Mutants*.

¹³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013).

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁸ Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth, "Editorial: Performance and Performativity in Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18 (2015).

¹⁹ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Amaral, Polivanov, and Soares, "Disputas."

²¹ The interviewees' pseudonyms are iconic comic book characters. Because of the length of this paper, I do not describe my process in methodological detail. All English translations are my own.

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²³ Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *O mundo dos bens: por uma antropologia do consumo* (São Paulo: Editora FGV, 2006).

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²⁵ Ibid.

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²⁷ Barbosa and Campbell, "O estudo."